

# **Humanitarian Violence: The U.S. Deployment of Diversity.** Neda Atanasoski. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 260 pages. \$75.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

In June 1999, announcing an end to US-led NATO air strikes in Kosovo, Bill Clinton looked back on a “bloody century” and forecasted the future of American military intervention. “Because of our resolve,” he told a national audience, “the twentieth century is ending not with helpless indignation but with a hopeful affirmation of human dignity and human rights for the twenty-first century” (qtd. in Atanasoski 138). In her important new book, *Humanitarian Violence: The U.S. Deployment of Diversity*, Neda Atanasoski clarifies how the United States’ stated role in the wars of succession in the former Yugoslavia drew on Cold War legacies and, as Clinton predicted, anticipated the military violences of the new century, and she locates this point of convergence precisely in the state’s appeal to “human dignity and human rights.” Defining what she calls a *postsocialist imperialism* based in humanitarian ethics, Atanasoski shows how the United States has presented itself as morally suited to humanize spaces of atrocity by violently instituting normative ways of inhabiting racial, religious, and sexual difference in Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Through analyses of fiction, film, travel writing, and photojournalism, *Humanitarian Violence* scrutinizes how Americans encounter these regions as places of monstrous violence through which they affirm their own humanity and commitment to multicultural values.

By focusing on the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980s and the Clinton-era wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, Atanasoski crucially sheds light on the origins of the twenty-first-century racialization of Islam. Building on the work of such scholars as Jodi Melamed and Nikhil Singh, who have demonstrated how state violence is not merely a racialized practice but also itself a mode of race-making, she argues that the Cold War necessitated that the United States racialize belief systems—especially socialism as a limit to liberal capitalism—and that the end of the Cold War, in turn, led to the displacement of this racial project onto emergent illiberal forms

of governance and religiosity. Eastern Europe is key to understanding this displacement because, as figured within the racial logic of whiteness, it demanded a reworking of imperial tropes inherited from the colonial and Cold War eras. Whereas US military interventions in the Middle East and East Asia were rationalized as “the benevolent defense of nonwhite natives” from communist interference, Atanasoski writes, “the ‘Communist East’ emerged as a racialized negative reflection onto which the nation could project imperialist tendencies and a racist past” (21). Ethnoreligious conflict was imagined as a premodern condition—an unenlightened state from which the United States had long ago progressed—that compelled disciplining violence in defense of human diversity.

*Humanitarian Violence* dynamically chronicles the emergence of the United States’ moral empire as an afterlife of, and response to, European imperialism and Cold War racial formations. Focusing on late twentieth-century travelogues by Andrea Lee, Yelena Khanga, and Robert Kaplan, the first chapter shows how postsocialist imperialism depended on the racialization of religious beliefs and social worlds as anachronistic and cyclically violent to reinforce the progress narrative of US liberal multiculturalism. Chapter Two advances the surprising and insightful claim that cultural criticisms of American military brutality in the Vietnam War actually laid the groundwork for future imperial wars. Atanasoski contends that, in the late twentieth century, the war in Southeast Asia was reimagined as a moral victory for Americans, whose outrage at the military violences depicted by Western photographers represented an evolution in American humanitarian feeling and subsequently paved the way for the wars in the Balkans. “What might it mean,” she provocatively asks, “to rethink Vietnam War-era photojournalism not as simply revealing the horrific acts committed by the United States but also as affirming American humanitarianism?” (95). Identifying Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as a narrative framework for these limited critiques of imperial warfare, Atanasoski reveals how American humanitarian affect redeemed the military defeat in Vietnam and situated the United States as an evolved moral actor in future wars.

The next three chapters track the development of humanitarian militarism in the wake of Vietnam. The third chapter shows how media coverage of the Soviet-Afghan War represented Afghanistan as a site of religious persecution by atheistic Soviet imperialism, imploring Americans to renew their faith in military interventionism as a way of defending religious freedom. Interrogating the new meaning ascribed to Steve McCurry’s iconic 1985 photo “Afghan Girl” after 9/11, Atanasoski clarifies how two decades later, in the absence of communist ideology, the Afghan mujahedeen came to embody the human rights abuses previously associated with the Soviet Union. Chapter Four argues that during the NATO bombing of Serbia and Kosovo the Clinton administration mobilized a nineteenth-century gothic lens to describe the Balkans as a space of primordial, vampiric violence that could be brought into the fold of modernity through

disciplining military and media technologies. Finally, turning to the UN-established International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the fifth chapter considers the degree to which Euro-American feminists' investment in the redemptive power of international law endorses a narrowed vision of justice grounded in liberal rights discourse.

Although *Humanitarian Violence* concentrates on the years between the end of Vietnam and the beginning of the War on Terror, Atanasoski concludes by tracing the legacy of humanitarian militarism into the twenty-first century, where it has continued to structure wars fought in the name of religious tolerance and women's rights. Indeed, this is one of the book's most urgent contributions to postcolonial studies, feminist studies, and, most broadly, the study of war in American cultural life. While most scholars have taken either the Cold War or the War on Terror as their discrete object of study, Atanasoski addresses how the United States got from there to here and what this might reveal about the future of US warfare. Most crucially, she shows how the assumed solution to military violence—the defense of “human dignity and human rights”—has frequently served as a justification for further violence. Only by first exposing this process, Atanasoski emphasizes, can activists, cultural producers, and critics “begin to conceptualize and reclaim alternative formulations for justice” (208).

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